

The Institution of Engineers, Australia: Sydney Division
Engineering Heritage Committee
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE: **Gordon MESSITER**

TAPE NUMBERS: IEA SYD: FH24,
 FH25, FH26 &

FH27

INTERVIEWER: **Frank HEIMANS**

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RESTRICTIONS ON USE: Nil.

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INTERVIEW TAPE LOG

Tape: IEA SYD: FH24, Side A.

TAPE COUNTER	SUBJECT	NAMES & KEYWORDS
001	Start of Tape IEA:SYD:FH24	
007	States that he was born on 28 September 1936 in Auburn, Sydney. Being desperately poor in a family with eight children, his family left without paying the rent to live in a bush humpy at Kirrawee, with no running water and services. Talks about early years at Sutherland Public School and at Sydney Technical High School.	Auburn Kirrawee Sutherland Public School. Sydney Technical High School
065	Gives the background and education of his parents. His father had worked as a Brickie's Labourer before the war and on the wharves after the war. Says that his father drank too much and was away for the entire war years, leaving the family in desperate straits.	'Brickie's Labourer'.

111	Recalls that when in 1952 he was halfway through Fourth Year at Sydney Technical High School, his mother asked him to get a job to support the family.	
120	Says that he just accepted the fact that he had to work. Started work as a junior with the Department of Road Transport and Tramways in a Tramways Substation. After a short period there, it was decided to close down the tram network and he was redeployed to Randwick Bus Depot as a junior cleaner, cleaning buses.	Darlinghurst Tramway Substation. Randwick Bus Depot
147	Remembers that his boss advised him to seek an apprenticeship elsewhere and in 1957 he was apprenticed as an electrical fitter and mechanic at Garden Island Dockyard. On completion of his apprenticeship, he started work in the Electrical Drawing Office as a draftsman.	Garden Island Naval Dockyard
172	Completed his education at Technical College (night school) and gained his Leaving and Matriculation Certificate. When he had completed that, he enrolled at Sydney Technical College to begin a Diploma in Engineering Course. Recalls that the UNSW had a full time and a part time course in Engineering but feels that the university discriminated against part-time students because UNSW did not at that time offer degrees for part time students but a degree called 'Bachelor of Science, Technology'. Soon after he had started the Diploma Course at Sydney Technical College, the NSW University of Technology started offering part time Engineering degree courses.	Sydney Technical College University of NSW NSW University of Technology
233	Returning to the war years, feels that his father left the family to join the Army because he was frustrated in his life, with hard work, poor education and opportunities. Saw the chance of overseas travel and a full-time job in the Army.	

261	Remembers that his father used to write from overseas (Middle East) and thinks that his mother was a wonderful woman, bringing up six, and later eight children. Thinks that his father was fortunate in that his Division was not chosen to fight in the Pacific theatre. Says that his father drank to excess and gambled on racehorses as a form of escape from the burdens and pressures of life.	
369	Says that he had the audacity to break out from the working-class life and that he had great ambitions to succeed.	
374	Thinks that he entered Sydney Technical High School largely by accident, being streamed there from the local school. Says that at he did not initially have great expectations of academic performance, but that he had excellent teachers. Concedes however that he struggled to gain good marks in English and Social Studies, but excelled in Maths and most other subjects.	Sydney Technical High School
438	End of Tape IEA SYD:FH24 Side A	

Tape: IEA SYD: FH24, Side B.

001	Continuation of interview with Gordon Messiter.	
005	Says that as a very late developer and undersized, he was playing in the Under Six Stone football team. Enjoyed the academic work.	
023	Recalls that in his first job with the Dept of Transport and Tramways at the age of 15, he worked shifts on cycles of seven days on and two days off, sweeping floors and dusting.	Rotary Converters in Substation

068	<p>Recounts that later in life, when he was in a senior position in the Dept of Transport, he looked at the history of the Dept of Tramways and could not understand why he was hired as a Substation Junior when the decision to close down the tramway system had already been taken.</p>	
094	<p>Remembers having been successful in a Vocational Guidance Test for the position as an apprentice at Garden Island Dockyard.</p>	Vocational Guidance Test
110	<p>Was called up for National Service in 1956 for six months training in the Air Force At Wagga Wagga. Says that by this time he was physically fit and a good runner. Completed his Trade Certificate at Wagga Technical College by studying Aircraft Engineering. Mentions that he just missed out on serving in the Korean War and later missed out on the Vietnam War.</p>	National Service Training Wagga Wagga
181	<p>Mentions that when he returned from National Service he had completed the Technical College course but went back to the Drawing Office to complete the last part of his apprenticeship. Had to demonstrate that he was continuing with his studies in order to stay in the Drawing Office. One of his mentors, Bobby Bywater, advised him to continue his studies.</p>	Bobby Bywater, Electrical Engineer.
201	<p>Met his future wife, Beverley, an Electrical Tracer in the Drawing Office and married her in 1960.</p>	Beverley Messiter
215	<p>Recalls that his greatest aspiration then was to become a Grade III Engineer. Thinks that the Drawing Office was a defining time and turning point in his life.</p>	Grade III Engineer

240	Reflects that his wife Beverley found a job with the Electricity Authority and that he started building their first home. When his wife became pregnant, he decided to look for another job and joined the Electricity Commission as an Electrical Draftsman at a higher salary rate than he had been earning and in an industry where growth was phenomenal. While working there in a full-time job, he also attended university courses in B.Sc. (Tech) in electrical engineering at UNSW.	Electricity Commission Vales Point Power Station Munmorah Power Station
315	Made the move from the Electricity Commission in 1967 to become a Traffic Engineer with the Dept of Motor Transport because after graduating from UNSW, he waited in vain for a position as an engineer with the Electricity Commission. Left the Electricity Commission bitterly disappointed with his boss, George Glasson and digresses that much later, when he had become a senior bureaucrat in the Dept of Motor Transport, he met George Glasson again, who wondered why he had left.	Dept of Motor Transport George Glasson
382	Mentions that at that time, Electrical Engineers were becoming involved in Traffic Engineering because they were responsible for traffic signals. Enjoyed his time with the new discipline in the changeover from electro-mechanical devices to solid state electronics.	Traffic Engineering Electro-mechanical devices
439	End of tape IEA SYD:FH24 Side B	

Tape: IEA SYD: FH25, Side A.

001	Continuation of interview with Gordon Messiter	
004	Details his time with the Department of Motor Transport in Traffic Engineering: linking and coordinating traffic signals to form a more systematic traffic management concept.	Rae French, Chief Engineer, Dept of Motor Transport
033	Recalls that the Sydney city project traffic control centre was enhanced. It had used a big industrial application computer with a room full of cabinets with vacuum glass diodes and valves and this was replaced by a new computer as big as a suitcase with 100 times the switching power. Developed new ways of detecting traffic flows and density to improve traffic signal efficiency, including the use, for the first time, of television monitoring.	Vacuum diodes Television monitoring of traffic flow.
086	Extended this newly found technology from the centre of Sydney into the arterial road network, using linear coordination along arterial roads to improve traffic flow. Adds that at that time they were leading Australia in developing state-of-the-art traffic management.	Rae French Harry Camkin Arthur Sims
115	Maintains that the DMR were very jealous of this new very sophisticated traffic management technology that the Department of Motor Transport had developed. Mentions that the DMR had wanted to take over the Dept of Motor Transport, but that this was resisted.	DMR (Department of Main Roads)
125	Says that Prof Ross Blunden had become a consultant for the Dept of Motor Transport and had set up the School of Traffic Engineering. Enrolled as a part-time student for his Masters Degree at UNSW in 1967.	Prof Ross Blunden, School of Traffic Engineering UNSW

141	Explains that he was able to learn more about Traffic Engineering and Management and details the sorts of subjects that he studied, enabling him to apply scientific principles to management: statistics, mathematical modelling, flow-charting, etc. Mentions that he found all these new tools immensely useful.	
160	Helped Ray French and recruited Dr Michael Henderson to set up the Traffic Accident Research Unit, the first of its type in Australia, which heralded a new scientific approach to traffic accidents. Adds that he headed up the section dealing with Traffic Accident Analysis and that he learnt a great deal about the accident process from a scientific viewpoint. Mentions that statistical analysis of road accidents made it possible to demonstrate the level of savings of lives and injuries by the analysis of accident data. Says that this research resulted in the introduction of compulsory use of seatbelts. Relates that NSW was the second place in the world where this took place.	Dr Michael Henderson TARU (Traffic Accident Research Unit). Introduction of compulsory seat belt legislation
220	Predicted that a reduction of 20% in road accident fatalities would occur and that these figures were almost precisely what occurred after the introduction of seat belt legislation.	Road fatality reduction forecasts
225	Observes that TARU also predicted that road fatalities would be reduced by introducing the breathalyser legislation, and that this also occurred.	Breathalyser legislation
245	Talks about his sense of social justice and of the excitement of doing work that was innovative and that no one else in the world was doing.	

250	Tells of the factors that caused TARU to be set up as an independent authority that could provide engineering research, assess safety measures to be put into cars and make recommendations to government to introduce safety measures, such as improvements in steering wheel design, dashboards, seat belt mountings, etc. Says that TARU would test to see if industry was meeting engineering requirements. Mentions that this testing extended to influencing legislation relating to vehicles, roads, speed limits, road sign design and the management of the road system.	Crash simulations.
320	Cites some statistics to show the reduction of road fatalities per head of population during the past several decades.	Reduction in road fatalities
338	Gives reasons for his move from TARU to a new job in Canberra with the then Department of Capital Territory in 1973.	Dept of Capital Territory
368	Was involved in early transport expansion plans for Canberra. Moved to Commonwealth Department of Transport in Canberra, which had strong centralist aspirations. Mentions that one of the projects he had responsibility for was to develop a Commonwealth Road Construction Authority to start up a National Highway network.	Commonwealth Department of Transport Commonwealth Road Construction Authority
432	End of Tape AEI SYD:FH25 Side A	

Tape: IEA SYD: FH25, Side B.

002	Continuation of interview with Gordon Messiter	
006	Felt that he was, for the first time, having an impact nationally, working on 'big picture' projects, such as the direction of public transport, road development, the National Highway System and the Australian Passenger Train, (a planned uniform urban train for all Australian cities). Mentions that most of these projects did not eventuate after the change of Government in November 1975 because the new Liberal Government did not have the strong centralist tendencies of the Whitlam Labor Government.	Whitlam Government initiatives. National Highway System Australian Passenger Train Project
065	Relates that the Commonwealth Department of Motor Transport in which he worked from 1973 to 1975 was the first time in Australia's history that a single Department of Transport at Commonwealth level was set up: previous to that there had been separate Shipping, Road, Railways and Aviation Departments. Its role was integration of all forms of Transport in Australia.	
088	Was offered a very attractive job as Head of Transport Planning and Policy in the NSW Ministry of Transport and Highways by Ken Trott, Head of the Department. Returned to Sydney in 1975 to take up that position. His role was to implement the recommendations of the Sydney Area Transportation Study, then just completed.	Ken Trott, Head of NSW Ministry of Transport and Highways
116	Recalls that the Sydney Area Transportation Study (SATS) was an archaic idea that did not fit Sydney, produced by an American firm. Mentions that his job was to see what Sydney did need.	SATS (Sydney Area Transportation Study).

150	Says that he shifted the emphasis away from the grand, improbable plan and concentrated on a plan that used available resources over a 5-10 year horizon. Was able to propose cost-benefit analyses to predict what might happen if certain measures were taken.	
184	Recalls that these decisions on the future investment program led to major freeway corridor abandonment such as the North-Western Freeway planned through Glebe and the proposed extension of the Warringah Freeway across Sugarloaf Bay.	North-Western Freeway Warringah Freeway Sugarloaf Bay
205	Confirms that a heavy railway from the Sydney CBD to the Northern Beaches was beyond the investment capabilities of the State.	
210	Thinks that the DMR had a 'highway vision' of expressways through Sydney. Singles out the interchange at Darling Harbour proposed by DMR between the proposed North-Western Freeway, the Western Freeway, the proposed Southern Freeway and connections to the city which would have filled the entire Darling Harbour area with freeway ramps, fly-overs and overpasses. Claims that if all the road funds for the next 20 years were to be spent, it would not have been enough to build that interchange. Confirms that it was his job to tell Government that it could not do that.	Darling Harbour
244	Says that not much could be built at that time in the urban sector due to the severe shortage of capital funds. Looked to private industry to provide funds for infrastructure project construction and at the possibility of transfer of state-owned infrastructure to private industry to operate.	Second Harbour crossing (Tunnel)
290	Talks about some of the early proposed sites for a second Harbour crossing and bridge and tunnel combinations.	Second Harbour crossing.

310	Recalls the tension that existed between his Department and the DMR, who had an 'Americanised' idea of road building and possessed a 'cargo cult' mentality.	
332	Succeeded Ken Trott as Secretary and Department Head of the Ministry of Transport from 1984. Reviews his role in the NSW Ministry of Transport. Says that one of his achievements was to turn the DMR's thinking on road building towards the west of Sydney.	Ken Trott
399	Can't remember any policy decisions that he regretted. After he left the Ministry of Transport, there was a change of government and the organization that he headed now no longer exists.	
438	End of Tape IEA SYD:FH25 Side B	

Tape: IEA SYD: FH26, Side A.

002	Continuation of an interview with Gordon Messiter	
007	Thinks that he had a rather utopian view of the world but what he found was that it was possible to reverse progress when the government changed to a Liberal government. Recalls that the new government disbanded the Urban Transport Study Group of which he had been a part. Did not agree with the view of the new government, which he feels did not have the interest of society at heart. Feels that it was a hard lesson for him and a great regret of Public Administration that so much that had been built up could be destroyed.	David Iverach, Engineer Urban Transport Study Group

055	Mentions, before the change of government having worked with Barry Unsworth at the Ministry of Transport and when Unsworth was given the new portfolio of Minister for Health, was invited to become the Secretary and Department Head of the Department of Health in 1986.	Barry Unsworth
090	Believes that the job of being Department Head of the Ministry for Health was a 'poisoned chalice' because the problems within Health were insurmountable. Singles out the entrenched and conservative position of doctors and surgeons who were very powerful within the medical system. Talks about the doctor's strike of 1985 and its effects.	NSW Ministry of Health. Doctors' Strike of 1985
134	Comments that there were also problems within Hospital Administration and that Area Health Services Legislation changed the relationships and dynamics of the power that hospitals held and gave the Department of Health a bigger say in programs, policies and priorities.	Area Health Services Legislation
143	Mentions the Richmond Report, a de-institutionalisation program, which produced great change within health administration. Thinks that before that report was implemented, hospital administration was getting out of control.	Richmond Report
172	States that the Government did not have control over budgets, which were regularly exceeded. Thinks that the Area Health Services Legislation, which was brought in, addressed this problem and also corrected the duplication of services.	Area Health Services Legislation

199	Believes that the cost of imaging with new equipment being brought into the country by private health operators would have gone out of control with proliferation and duplication of equipment by many hospitals. Focused on making hospitals specialise in certain aspects of health to avoid duplication of services and equipment.	Magnetic Resonance Imager
224	Believes that he learnt from Engineering the systematic way of administering a discipline, such as Health, so far removed from Engineering. Used a flow-charting process to look at critical path analyses.	Critical Path Analysis
260	Recalls that when Barrie Unsworth became NSW Premier, he left the Health Ministry and his challenger for the Premiership, Peter Anderson, became the new Minister for Health. Thinks that he was observed to be 'the cuckoo in the nest'. Adds that Barrie Unsworth then, in 1987, asked him to become Deputy Secretary and Secretary Designate to become the Head of the Premier's Department and accepted the position.	Barrie Unsworth Peter Anderson Gerry Gleeson
281	Recounts that he served for six months in that position until the 1988 election, when Barrie Unsworth was defeated and a change of government occurred. Was perceived to be too close to the previous government and was then appointed to set up the Department of Administrative Services. Mentions that his job was to set it up, make it efficient and then to disband it.	Nick Greiner Dept of Administrative Services, Greiner NSW Government

326	Confirms that he had to sack a lot of staff, but embraces the concept of economic rationalisation. Recognised that Australia was in serious economic strife and that drastic measures needed to be taken. Is happy to call himself an Economic Rationalist and realises the need for Australia to become globally competitive. Acknowledges that there was a cost to government, because government services were used and believes that private industry could be more efficient.	
390	Says that although his job was painful in that he had to terminate the jobs of a lot of his colleagues, recognised that the change was necessary. Mentions that in most cases, those who lost their jobs were taken on in private industry.	
419	Singles out the School Cleaning Unit which had about 12,000 employees and which he describes as 'the biggest cleaning service in the world.' Says that public tenders were called and the service was then privatised.	School Cleaning Unit
448	End of Tape IEA SYD:FH26 Side A	

Tape: IEA SYD: FH26, Side B.

002	Continuation of interview with Gordon Messiter.	
006	Confirms that all of the 12,000 employees were affected by the privatisation scheme for the School Cleaning Unit, but claims that most of the employees retained their jobs, although the numbers were reduced by voluntary redundancy and by attrition.	
022	Mentions other rationalisation cases: the State's major computing system which was bought out by management and which was then bought out by Fujitsu and eventually, again by British Telecom.	Fujitsu British Telecom
042	Emphasises that they downscaled staff until there were about 600 employees at the end of the economic rationalisation measures, but that the State Government still controlled the contracts and set the standards. There were many fewer employees on the government's payroll but services were now being provided by contracting out the work.	Downscaling of staff from 12,000 to 600 permanent employees
046	Thinks that governments are not here to create jobs but to create opportunities for employment as a part of macro-economic reform.	
057	Talks about the changes in jobs and industries from old-fashioned manufacturing to the new information technology-based industries. Thinks that the economy should be directed towards these new industries and into areas where we can become competitive with the rest of the world.	Information-technology based industries.

077	Thinks that one of the achievements he initiated was the entry into electronic commerce in the late 1980s with electronic document interchange. Takes credit for building the Commercial Services Group within the Department of Administrative Services, which was to manage this new cutting-edge technology.	Electronic Document Exchange Commercial Services Group, Dept of Admin. Services
090	Confirms that his group introduced the first stored value card system with the idea of using technology to run Public Administration.	Stored Value card System
102	Recalls that in 1995, there was another change of Government to the Carr Labor Government. Adds that a decision had already been taken to amalgamate the Commercial Services Group with the Department of Public Works and that as a result, he found himself without a job.	Carr Labor Government
118	Was appointed as Acting Chief Executive of the State Rail Authority in 1995. Mentions that the Premier had decided to introduce the Hilmer Reforms and that his job was to restructure the State Rail Authority by introducing and implementing the Hilmer Reforms into the SRA.	SRA (State Rail Authority) Hilmer Reforms
142	Explains the Hilmer Reforms and what they were designed to do. Gives some examples in the rail and freight industries of competition from private industry to improve efficiency by having more than one urban rail or freight operator.	Essential infrastructure.
216	Gives the example of the electricity industry where government can control the essential infrastructure and systems control, but where private industry could operate the generators and handle distribution.	Electricity industry

268	Admits that he fell out with the Minister, who had different aspirations to his and who had a different vision. Adds that although Cabinet had made the decision to introduce the Hilmer Reforms into the SRA, the Minister did not agree with Cabinet and had an old-fashioned view. Says that as a result of the difference in opinion between himself and Brian Langton, he again found himself out of a job. Hopes that the model he proposed will still be introduced in the 21st century.	Brian Langton, Former Minister in the Carr Labor Government. Vertical integration
300	Explains the concept of vertical integration as an unhealthy arrangement that existed in the SRA system. Talks about the separation of track ownership and signal control by competitors.	Vertical integration
341	Believes that it is imperative in the Electricity industry that the distributors and the generators are privatised. Forecasts that this will occur within the current term of the Carr Government.	Privatisation of Electricity industry in NSW
398	End of Tape IEA SYD:FH26 Side B	

Tape: IEA SYD: FH27, Side A.

002	Continuation of interview with Gordon Messiter	
005	Believes that the State's Railways can be brought into the 21 st century but that they need a great deal of change to survive. Thinks that the Hilmer Report was a step in the right direction, but one that was not able to be implemented and thinks that was a great loss.	
030	Talks about capital infusions from private capital to develop infrastructure projects, which can then be returned to the State after a number of years. Thinks that Railways should not be used to deliver a social benefit to the community. Holds the view that any social benefits to the community should be separated from the operation of infrastructure, such as railways, which should be an efficient operation.	Separation of social justice aims from efficiency in operation
063	Mentions that, as Chairman of the Electricity Reform Steering Committee (1995) his task was to establish a national electricity market place, which would allow the interconnection of electricity grids of all the states to enable them to feed in anywhere on the network.	Electricity Reform Steering Committee.
097	Discusses his career move in July 1996 to Randwick Council to become their General Manager.	The Hon. Ernie Page (Minister for Local Government)
131	Talks about problems with Randwick Council, which existed when he became their General Manager, such as an ICAC enquiry, which had found that a number of councillors had acted corruptly. The General Manager and senior staff had been sacked and he was appointed there to fix the problems.	Randwick Municipal Council ICAC Enquiry

144	Admits that the politics of working in Local Government have been the most difficult he has ever experienced. Claims that the weight of his experience in administration was able to bring the Council towards the modern way of thinking.	Local Government politics
184	Holds that the challenge of Local Government is its sensitive nature, as people want to develop their land or extend their properties. Thinks that one can make Local Government work through reforms that no government to date has been prepared to introduce.	Reforms in Local Government
209	Believes that he is achieving his objectives of bringing the council to higher standards of administration. Concedes that being GM of a Municipal Council is a very challenging job.	
246	Believes that the principles he picked up in Engineering equip him to be a competent administrator. Sees himself now as a Manager and not as an Engineer.	
278	Thinks that his great sense of social justice has been a major driving force in his career.	Driving force
300	Jokes that his greatest achievement was probably struggling through an Engineering degree. Thinks he made an impact in Traffic Engineering and Rational Transport Planning and in understanding the issues of competition policy, reform and globalisation of the economy.	Greatest achievements
323	Reports that his greatest disappointment was not having been appointed to be Secretary of the Premiers Department.	Greatest disappointment
340	Believes himself to be a good persuader.	Persuader

349	In thinking about life after retirement, hopes that he will be able to pass on knowledge and experience that he has amassed. Would like to be appointed as a non-executive director on a Board of a public sector, business or community organisation.	Retirement
374	Thinks that he has been a mentor to many professional people, women in particular.	Mentor
388	Talks about his family (3 children, all married with no grandchildren as yet).	Children and grandchildren
419	End of the interview with Gordon Messiter and end of Tape IEA SYD:FH27 Side A	